

## **The Thing Around His Neck** by **CiderApples**

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Family Feels, Gen, father daughter, hopper can't sleep

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper

**Relationships:** Eleven | Jane Hopper & Jim "Chief" Hopper

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2018-03-19

**Updated:** 2018-03-19

**Packaged:** 2022-04-21 15:26:29

**Rating:** General Audiences

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 1,361

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

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He hasn't slept the night in a really, really long time.

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## The Thing Around His Neck

El's sleeping, but Hop can't.

He hasn't slept the night in a really, really long time. Things still come out at night: from himself, if not from the woods.

It's weird to be back by the lake again, sleeping in his old bed. It's not an ounce more comfortable than he remembers.

El's shiny new birth certificate, already wrinkled from traveling a day in his pocket (and despite her best efforts to smooth it), is framed on the wall where she can see it. She likes it there, but Hop's not sure.

The thing affects him. Through the air and through the walls, through the door of the fridge, like he can feel it even when he's not looking. Its presence digs down under all the everyday operations — Girl Scout enrollment deadlines and back-to-school sales and what funny sounds make El laugh — and tunnels straight into a cave he'd dug and buried a decade ago. Seeing "Jane Hopper" in print every day is unburying that cave, like right now, every second, and whatever was piled away inside it has him hard by the throat.

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Hopper jolts awake in the dark but stays in bed, diligently laying on his back with his eyes closed for at least half an hour, until he realizes his heart is beating so fast that he won't get within firing distance of sleep again. Giving up, he pulls on a sweater as he shuffles out to the kitchen table. He leaves the lights off (because if anything does come, he's not going to miss it), lays his sidearm out on the table, and starts disassembling.

Oiling and buffing is meditative; he can do it by heart, even in the dark. It smells familiar. Feels familiar in his hand. And he can make it silent, which he needs to do because his house isn't big, the walls -- while more robust than the cabin -- aren't exactly soundproof, and if

there's anything El needs, it's a lifetime of good sleep.

What *he* needs is different and he can't yet put it into words, but he's got the feeling it'll eat him alive before too much longer.

It doesn't take as long to clean the gun as he wants it to, but the piece still looks pristine when he's done. He admires the shine in the moonlight and then gets up to stand pointlessly in the living room, waiting to see if the sun'll come up early.

It doesn't.

Hop looks back into the depths of his room, where his bed is freezing and bleak and reeking with nine-ish years of night sweats. Next to that hellmouth, El's closed door is relatively comforting: it's covered in Mike's taped-up drawings and little nameplates that used to say, "Helen" before he took a pocketknife and a Sharpie and turned them into 'Eleven.' A few new ones say, "Jane." He wonders which ones they'll settle on. Maybe both?

He moves toward the door one aimless step at a time, listening to the fridge noises and the clock noises and the ticks and tangs of the radiators until he's close enough to lay a hand on the wood. Tempted as he is to push it open, peek in, make sure she's still there, he doesn't. Instead, he puts his back to the wall and slides down into a knees-up sit against the wallpaper and drywall and fewer two-by-fours than city code strictly requires.

The thing around Hopper's throat likes this. It wants him hugging the wall, pressed as close as he can get.

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An hour later, Hop wakes up warm on one side and freezing on the other.

The warm side is covered in a pink blanket, and under it is Eleven, who is asleep — or not asleep. Just waiting. She opens her eyes the moment she senses he's opened his.

“Hey,” he says. It sounds like he’s coughing up a hairball; he hasn’t spoken since he got up. “What’re you doing out here?”

“What’re you doing out here?” she echoes.

He shakes his head. “Trying to get some shuteye. At least, I was,” he accuses lightly, but puts an arm around her. She huddles into the hollow beneath.

“Here?” she persists.

“Yep,” he says.

“Why?”

“Because,” he starts, and doesn’t want to plant any worries so he omits the gun cleaning and racing heart, “you need your rest.”

She tries to find the connection between these two things: the large man folded up outside her door, and rest.

“I want you to, you know, feel like someone’s got you covered,” he clarifies. “Looking out for you.”

“Looking out for what?” she asks.

He frowns and looks away.

It’s a great question.

It’s a stupid question.

What the hell is he supposed to answer?

“Bad stuff,” is what he tells her. “Bad guys. You know,” he says. Saying that makes him feel stupid. Bad guys? He’s not sitting in front of her door because he’s expecting bad guys to come crashing in the windows, and his gut knows it. They’re done with all that. Whatever’s got his hackles up, it’s something else.

El stares off with her hair all stiff and splayed straight up up like a bird wing. She hasn’t gotten the trick of washing all the gel out

before she goes to sleep.

“You want me to go back to bed?” Hop asks neutrally, pulling the blanket up over her shoulder where it’s fallen. If she wants him to, he’ll fake it.

But El looks over at the dark maw of his open room and shakes her head.

He accepts this, then flips it: “Do you want to go back to bed?”

She frowns. He waits. And she doesn’t answer.

Eh, fuck it. He stares down the hall toward the kitchen, toward the table with the gun grease he forgot to put away, where the windows are starting to glow pale, deep blue.

“Tell you what,” he says. His voice is warming up, finally, starting to smooth out. “Ever see the sun rise?”

The edges of her mouth tic down briefly, and he winces to remember that she lived in the woods like a wild animal, slept in the snow, and probably saw enough sunrises for a lifetime. Something floods him, intense as a drug, and his hand makes a fist in her blanket. “Yeah,” he says. “Of course you have.”

El looks down at her knees, but when she looks up, she doesn’t seem upset. “I want to see the sun rise,” she says.

It takes Hop a moment, but he finds his enthusiasm again. “Okay,” he says. “Okay. Well, I know a place. This time of night there shouldn’t be anyone-”

“Morning,” she corrects. “Morning is past twelve-zero-ze- ...twelve o’clock.” She grins, and another drug, completely different, socks him in the back of the chest. Whiplash.

“Morning, that’s right,” he amends. His shifts his legs, trying to get feeling back into them before attempting to stand, and gives her a nudge. “Go put on something toasty, kid; I’ll pack up a Thermos.”

She’s sleepy and slow to get up, so he counts to three and whips the

blanket off her and then she comes alive, fully awake, running for her sweater and coat, the ties of her flannel pajamas flapping out behind her and her socks going long and floppy off her toes against the old carpet. She slams her door behind her and Hopper heaves himself up to make good on his word.

There's a peach tea in the cupboard that she's just addicted to, with so much honey he might as well be feeding her Kool-Aid, but that's exactly what he's going to make. And this is what his morning is going to be: the dawn hour trapped in a truck with her; the smell of her fruity little shampoo saturating his work jacket to the point where the guys at the station'll feel like they have the right to make comments; sipping that tea until his blood sugar makes orbit; fielding El's increasingly chatty questions until he turns on the radio just to get some peace of mind.

The thing around his neck wants literally *nothing* else.